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UNITED NATIONS RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST

ILTER TURKMEN, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), discusses his agency's future in light of the recent political developments between the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and Israel. UNRWA will continue to provide services to the Palestine refugees during the interim period. Mr. Türkmen predicts a different role for the agency once a political settlement is reached in the Middle East.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is World Chronicle, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's World Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is World Chronicle. Recent political developments in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization appear to have set that turbulent part of the world on the road to peace and coexistence.

But what will happen to the more than two million Palestinian refugees scattered throughout the region and elsewhere in the world. Our guest today heads a major international agency whose purpose is to provide relief for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees. He's Ilter Türkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East or UNRWA. Joining me to speak with Mr. Türkmen are Raghida Dergham of *Al-Hayat* of London and Ian Williams of the *New York Observer*. Mr. Türkmen, welcome to World Chronicle.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Commissioner-General, with peace breaking out, do you foresee the time when your agency will be able to fold its tents and the Palestinians will be absorbed into a state of Palestine? I mean within the fairly near future?

TURKMEN: The declaration of principle signed between the Israelis and the Palestinians concerns an interim period and during this interim period, there would be negotiations on broader issues with a view to arrive at a permanent settlement. And among the issues which are left to these negotiations are the subject of the refugees. So the refugee problem will not receive a solution during the interim period but only at the end of the next negotiating phase.

LITTLEJOHNS: How long is this interim period supposed to last?

TURKMEN: The interim period will last five years and after - and at the latest, after the second year there would be negotiations on remaining issues like settlements, refugees and Jerusalem.

LITTLEJOHNS: During this five year period do you think that your agency can perhaps reduce the scope of its activities or does it mean that you'll have to increase them?

TURKMEN: Well, you see, first of all, if you take the refugees outside the territories, outside the West Bank and Gaza, we have something like one point eight million refugees in Syria, Lebanon and Jordan. And nothing will change in the status as

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long as there's no solution covering the refugee aspect of the problem as well. So our activities in these countries will continue as normal within our mandate.

DERGHAM: That is talk. I don't know whether you will have confirmation or a denial of it, or there is a fear at least that part of the plan is to have these Palestinian refugees in the particular countries settle there. For example, they will be absorbed by Lebanon where they are in Lebanon. The Palestinian refugees in Syria the same and there is the same idea for Jordan. Are you aware of this. Is this being worked on? Or is this not correct?

TURKMEN: This is a political problem which will have to be negotiated between the Arabs and also between the Arabs and Israel but we are not at this stage yet. For the moment we have agreement on an interim period and I say that we will continue to deal with the refugees outside the West Bank and Gaza and of course we are going to deal also with one million refugees - Palestinians who have refugee status in West Bank, in the West Bank and in Gaza.

DERGHAM: Well, when you have a country like Lebanon, the Prime Minister of Lebanon said before the General Assembly of the United Nations that no way there will be a settlement of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. That it's a political issue and it's a real issue. Where does this put UNRWA? Is this then your responsibility?

TURKMEN: The final - the permanent solution to the refugee problem is not our responsibility. Our responsibility is to take care of the refugees wherever they are and we have programmes in Lebanon. This is as I said will be negotiated. I think it's early to say what could be a likely outcome of this issue. We will have to await the negotiations but in the meantime, we are in agreement with the Government of Lebanon that our operations there would continue as usual.

WILLIAMS: Do you have feedback from the camps? Obviously the Palestinians in the territories themselves see this as a big break forward, an opportunity to be rid of Israeli occupation but are there amongst the people you care for in places like Jordan and Lebanon, are there reservations because of this hesitancy about addressing their particular problems? Are they less enthusiastic about the peace treaty than those in the territories?

TURKMEN: I don't know, it's not - there is no clear tendency but we have alerted the international community to the need to focus also on the other refugees because if there is for instance a great flow of funds to Gaza and the West Bank only and there is nothing - nothing is done to improve the living conditions of the other refugees, this might affect negatively, the peace process. So we have brought this question to the attention of the international community of the major donors and they

reacted very favourably and we are getting now some funds to try to improve the living conditions of the refugees particularly in Lebanon where we have a serious situation.

DERGHAM: You mean the allocation of funds there to help the Gaza-Jericho first option will be divided between Jericho and Gaza on one part and the Palestinian refugees in the diaspora?

TURKMEN: Well, I don't know how the funds are going to be divided but you see, the funds which are available are in addition to what are the regular programmes of UNRWA. So within the normal allocation of resources to UNRWA we can take care of some additional programmes in the other countries. And in Lebanon in particular there is an urgent need for houses for refugees.

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Türkmen, you went through a period, I believe, when you were threatening to cut back quite considerably all your programmes because of lack of funds. Has that financial difficulty been overcome?

TURKMEN: Well, we have had a deficit for 1993. It was a deficit of about something like fourteen million dollars ($14M) which we resolved by some savings. And some unfortunately cuts and some services, but nothing which will have a big impact. The measures we have taken will have an impact if we are deprived of resources in the next years but I hope that with advent of a new situation of the prospect of peace and of a greater willingness on the part of donor countries to allocate funds for the Palestinians, we shall be able to find a solution.

LITTLEJOHNS: Tell us a little about your programmes. What do you actually do for the refugees.

TURKMEN: Well, I think that we are known as a relief agency. This is not exactly true because we are also a development agency. We have been doing for more than forty years also education and health, which are an important component of development. And we are proud of our achievements because as far as health is concerned, I think that despite the very poor conditions in which refugees are living, their health situation is rather satisfactory. And so is education. So these are the main components of our problem, health, education in addition to it, social services and of course relief. We have added to it also something some income generation programmes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Some what?

TURKMEN: Income generation programmes.

LITTLEJOHNS: Meaning -

TURKMEN: We give loans to small businesses.

LITTLEJOHNS: What kind of businesses?

TURKMEN: Well, for instance tile manufacturers, carpentry shops. In agriculture, some nurseries and for some services, auto repair shops, things like that.

LITTLEJOHNS: So a fair number of the refugees are self supporting.

TURKMEN: Well, we have initiated this programme some two years ago and I'm very glad to say that it has been very successful and the money is paid back.

LITTLEJOHNS: Before we came on the air, you mentioned something about a peace implementation programme or plan. What's that?

TURKMEN: Well, we always had projects for refugees in all our five fields but in particular in the West Bank and Gaza and for instance, one of the big projects we had was the Gaza hospital. Groundbreaking ceremony has been done. This is a large project.

It will cost something like twenty million dollars ($20M) and it will provide jobs for one thousand people. So now that the international community would like to give some impetus to the economy of Gaza and the West Bank and to create rapidly jobs, we were asked to provide projects. And we call all these projects together the Peace Implementation Programme. We have identified projects totalling some seventy million dollars ($70M) which we can start immediately. And these projects are now being submitted to the donor countries. And the reaction is very good. We already have some commitments and we hope to start this projects, the realization of these projects very soon.

WILLIAMS: Two years ago when you built this hospital, when you were on this programme and you mentioned this hospital, you very presciently said you regarded it as a birthday present for the Palestinian state as it was coming. I was very impressed. I thought of you when the signing took place on the lawn. But -

TURKMEN: I repeated the same thing when we had the groundbreaking ceremony.

WILLIAMS: You remember your prophesies anyway. But UNRWA has been working there building - your agency's been building infrastructure in this area in the occupied territories for many years now. Are you a bit worried that suddenly with the - almost the fact that this is a fashionable project as opposed to one of the accords of the UN, that the work and expertise of UNRWA will be put to one side by a rush of carpetbaggers from other wealthy but less experienced institutions?

TURKMEN: I don't think so. I think that UNRWA will have a great role to play especially in the first two or three years because we are the largest organization in the West Bank and Gaza. It is not an international organization which can compare the scope of its activities. We are spending in our regular budget something like one

hundred and twenty million dollars ($120M) in West Bank and Gaza. We have a staff of eight thousand. So it's -

WILLIAMS: Do you have plans to sort of transfer your staff over to the Civil Service of the new Palestinian state?

TURKMEN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. We have had discussions with the Palestinians as you can imagine and they have asked us to continue our operations as usual without any change and even to expand wherever we can. And they would like also to cooperate with us in some upgrading of their own educational installations for instance. So we are now in a continuous dialogue with the Palestinians.

DERGHAM: But the very status of the Palestinians in Gaza for example is supposed to change from refugees to citizens of a Palestinian entity. Does that now have - would it have to lead to a change in your role as UNRWA, as a relief agency or do you have enough authority to just upgrade UNRWA's tasks to include helping the Palestinians in building a civil infrastructure? And the other infrastructure as well.

TURKMEN: Well, the status of refugees is not incompatible with the status of citizenship. Take Jordan for instance. In Jordan we have one million refugees. They all have Jordanian passports so this is something else. So in Gaza and the West Bank, the same situation will emerge. So we will not have any difficulty in our mandate from that point of view. But certainly we have been doing this in the past and we can do it. We can also expand our activities in order to provide services to other Palestinians as long as the Palestinian administration would like to have it.

DERGHAM: What would be the priorities now? You know the place. You know the problems in Gaza. You know the political decisions. As far as you're concerned, what should be your priority as UNWRA or as in cooperation with other agencies to make this work?

TURKMEN: Well, the first priority is to insure a smooth transition and to prevent any dislocation of the services and it's not our job but for the Palestinians to insure law and order and we are ready to help the new Palestinian administration as much as possible to achieve this objective.

Beyond this, there is the need to create immediately jobs, employment so that the Palestinians have the feeling that peace has been beneficial for them. This is very important. And this is why the UN and the international community in general and the World Bank are engaged in a new venture to improve the economic situation of the Palestinians as rapidly as possible.

DERGHAM: Including joint projects with the Israelis? Is this also part of what you'll be doing?

TURKMEN: Well, there would be. In the declaration of principles you have several committees for seeing that between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and a great economic operation is already expected.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is World Chronicle. Our guest is Ilter Türkmen, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

WILLIAMS: Is it true that Gaza poses a special political problem in the bulk of the population in the West Bank were the original inhabitants, whereas the bulk of the population in Gaza are refugees under the 1948 General Assembly Resolution 194 which talks about resettlement and/or compensation. So obviously to invest in a sort of permanent infrastructure works to resettle those refugees in Gaza, as rightly they were saying - it begs a political question on the implementation of the 1948 resolution. Most of these refugees officially according to international law, they have the right to return to their homes in what is now Israel. So I know that this is - seems farfetched, but it's still a political problem.

TURKMEN: This is a political problem which will be resolved later. For the moment what you said is true, that a greater proportion of the population in Gaza are refugees than in the West Bank. Six hundred thousand refugees in Gaza and four hundred thousand in the West Bank.

LITTLEJOHNS: Commissioner-General Türkmen, you mentioned that a couple of times, donor countries. Which are the donor countries and which among them is the largest contributor?

TURKMEN: The largest single contributor is the United States. The European community is a very large contributor both multilaterally and bilaterally and Japan is a great contributor. The Nordic countries, Sweden among them is one of the biggest contributors, and Canada.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about the Arab countries, particularly those that have oil riches? Are they contributors?

TURKMEN: Well, there are only two Arab countries which we can call major donors because they give more than a million dollar a year and these are Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But they don't go beyond very much the one million dollar mark.

LITTLEJOHNS: Why is that?

TURKMEN: I mean, they have their own position and they first of all say that they are helping directly the Palestinians bilaterally. That they are assisting the

Palestinian institutions in the West Bank and Gaza. And in their view UNRWA should be mostly financed by the western donors.

DERGHAM: In the past, to enforce your point, in the past, Arab states used to say that the issue of Palestinian refugees has been created by Israel and therefore the international community should be in charge of picking up the tab on what it had created of a refugee problem. But in fact also the Saudis have contributed quite a bit of money to the pledging conference in Washington which I think was -

TURKMEN: One hundred million, they pledged one hundred million dollars.

DERGHAM: A hundred million yeah.

LITTLEJOHNS: But I thought you just said that they contributed only about a million -

DERGHAM: That's before the political -

TURKMEN: This is what they pledged in Washington when there was the meeting to support peace and there they have announced a contribution of one hundred million dollars but we don't know yet how this amount is going to be distributed. We hope very much that UNRWA will receive part of it.

DERGHAM: Is it any such arrangement that where the pledging conference in Washington that there is a part of this monies that will be assigned to UNRWA projects or you don't know if you're getting anything?

TURKMEN: Oh, yes, we are getting. No - what - the money pledged in Washington will be channelled by the donor countries through several agencies. They will have to pick up and choose. And there would be among them a kind of coordination. There's a meeting - there will be meetings under the aegis of the World Bank on how this money is going to be used. But by and large, the countries will maintain the flexibility they want to maintain. And allocate this money to the agencies they want.

DERGHAM: Wouldn't that affect your long term planning? You see, I think what I'm trying to get at is the following. It seems that the United Nations has not been at least so far permitted to be active in this new implementation of the peace plan. That it is rather marginal. Probably except for UNRWA. Do you have reason to dispute that, that the United Nations agencies are not as involved as other outside non UN agencies in executing the projects for Gaza, Jericho --

TURKMEN: We have to await the report of the World Bank but I think - my feeling is that the World Bank is very much aware of the role that the United Nations system can play. Not only UNRWA but of course UNDP will be a major player also in the West Bank and Gaza. But as far as we are concerned, we attract more attention in

the short run. The other agencies are considered more geared towards the long term development of the West Bank and Gaza. But as there is a great urgency now to create employment they come to UNRWA because we have small projects which we can implement rapidly and which will create employment.

WILLIAMS: One of the things - you are an agency that has attracted the most attention from the Israeli occupation forces. And over the years you've had many pressures and incidents in which your staff have been harassed and imprisoned and were shot sometimes. Has the climate visibly improved for your staff since then?

TURKMEN: Oh, yes, oh, yes. The Israeli government, the Prime Minister himself has clearly expressed that they appreciate very much what UNRWA is doing and that they are supporting its activities.

WILLIAMS: Is that being reflected on the ground? I mean are the individual commanders, the military patrols etc. being solicitous of UNRWA's welfare in a way that they weren't in the past?

TURKMEN: Well, for the moment we have less incidents and things are going to change in April when there will be a patrol of forces from the Gaza, from Gaza and Jericho -

WILLIAMS: But there has been a significant change at the moment in attitude.

TURKMEN: There was no incident recently. I think that there is definitely a change on the part of the government. You know when governments take decisions, it doesn't infiltrate very rapidly to the administrative levels but certainly we are going to see.

DERGHAM: Can I follow up on this question now. There were prisoners, UN employees, particularly UN employees who have worked for UNRWA in particular who were taken prisoners or hostages, as once was recorded on this programmes by Israeli authorities. Recently there has been a release of Palestinian prisoners by the Israelis. Why haven't we seen the release of the United Nations employees who have been captured when working for UNRWA?

TURKMEN: Well, we have some thirty UNRWA employees in detention still. You know that this was a very limited release of prisoners. It affected only children, women and old age people. So this is only a part of the -

DERGHAM: But these are thirty international civil servants, Mr. Ambassador. These are civil servants who are employed by the United Nations. How come we have not heard anything about their release? What are you doing? Why the Israelis are not releasing them? They are hostages.

LITTLEJOHNS: Are these people who were hired locally or they -

TURKMEN: They are hired locally. They are not - they are what we call local staff. They are Palestinians.

LITTLEJOHNS: So are they strictly speaking, international civil servants as Raghida described them or not?

TURKMEN: No, they are not international.

DERGHAM: But have they been work - my understanding is that they were working for the UNRWA.

TURKMEN: Yes, but you know if you work for the United Nations in your own country, you don't have the same immunity as a foreigner working for the United Nations. This is true for all countries. You don't have this immunity. But the thing that we were complaining was that there was no information given to us under accusations about - accusations levelled against the particular staff.

DERGHAM: And how long has this been going, for some of them it's two years, three or four years that these people are in detention -

TURKMEN: All the time this is one of our perennial problems. There were also Palestinian UNRWA staff among those who were deported to Lebanon.

LITTLEJOHNS: These thirty people, what are they alleged to have done? Why did they -

TURKMEN: We don't know, this is the problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: No charges have been brought against them?

WILLIAMS: Under detention they don't have to be arrested or charged.

TURKMEN: This is our main complaint.

DERGHAM: But are you going to take advantage of the political - what are you doing to take advantage of the political attitude to secure or at least provide protection for the people you employ.

TURKMEN: The problem now is being discussed between the Palestinians and the Israelis. In Taba they are discussing this and -

DERGHAM: Where are you as UN? Where are you as UN -

TURKMEN: We are always making representations but we now have to discuss also with the Palestinians because this has become a global bilateral issue now and they are discussing it and I don't think that there would be any great advantage in us also intervening at this stage.

LITTLEJOHNS: Is the refugee population increasing substantially every year, Mr. Türkmen?

TURKMEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

LITTLEJOHNS: You have a population explosion in the camps?

TURKMEN: More than three percent in average, but more in Gaza for instance.

WILLIAMS: Has there ever been a census? Some Israeli institutions this week are trying to downgrade the number and say that it's been exaggerated.

TURKMEN: I think that now the time will come when they will - yes, the Israelis maintain that we are exaggerating the number of refugees but there's no census. We have to act on the basis of the cards that we have been issuing and on their families. There's no other way. There has never been a census.

LITTLEJOHNS: What is your annual budget?

TURKMEN: Around three hundred million dollars ($300M).

LITTLEJOHNS: And you need a lot more? I mean is that -

TURKMEN: Well, we will need more for the projects of course but the money for the projects will come separately and we are very confident that we will get -

LITTLEJOHNS: Mr. Türkmen, that's all the time we have. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle. This has been Ilter T

ürkmen,

Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA.

He was interviewed by Raghida Dergham with *Al-Hayat* of London and Ian Williams of the *New York Observer*. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

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